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SUGGESTIONS FOR THE HIGH-SCHOOL PLAY

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The wide popularity of the school play is pretty clearly indicated in the fact that 70 per cent of our college Freshmen have taken part in amateur dramatics. That teachers find many difficulties in selecting and producing these plays is equally clear from the dozens of letters that come to us every season. If we agree that dramatics can be made a really useful feature of school life, some practical suggestions may be of assistance to those who have not found the problem a simple one.

We may as well admit that the school productions are generally regarded as pure recreation for all concerned—except the hard-working coach. The Senior Play is an exhibition, where the girls may display themselves at their prettiest and the boys show how gallant or funny they can make themselves. Even so, the little vanities of the actors may be overruled for good. Indeed, the fact that the pupil's ambitions are natural and spontaneous means a fine opportunity for accomplishing ends not otherwise easily attained. Clear speech, ease of movement, and self-control are graces that may be taught in almost any play. If the drama has even a little claim to literary value the lessons may go much deeper; and they are none the less valuable because they are learned—or absorbed—freely and with pleasure.

In choosing the play, then, there should be a double purpose. First of all, it must entertain; it must give unforced pleasure to the audience. But this is never inconsistent with the other aim, to give the actors something worth doing. A school tradition, for instance,

¹ This paper, reprinted from the April *Bulletin* of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, was written as an answer to the commoner questions that have come to the writer from teachers inexperienced in directing school plays. The Drama Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, which has since been organized with the writer as chairman, intends soon to formulate in a broader way the aims, materials, and methods of the work. The committee will welcome further suggestions or requests for information, and will endeavor to serve as a clearing-house for the ideas and experiences of all who are actively engaged in this field.

may decree that the play be comic. It would be perhaps a cruel disappointment to present a somber drama. But there are dozens of comedies which will entertain worthily; and some farces, even, may justify themselves in production.

If this principle of choice seems to put a premium on mediocrity, I have not made myself clear. It is the only principle, I believe, which makes possible the consistent approach to an ideal. Apply it to some schools, and you would demand nothing less than annual productions of Shakespeare. But apply it elsewhere and you would have to admit that *The College Widow* might be a sensible choice, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would surely be a foolish one. Who profits if the *Dream* is so played (or so received) that every scene suggests the buffooneries of Bottom's actors?

With the best intentions in the world, however, the teacher often finds the choice of play very difficult. The themes of nine plays in ten bar them for school use. Then, too, the choice is conditioned by all sorts of hard facts: the number of available boys and girls; their height, voice, and ability; the size of the stage; its scenery or the lack of it; the expense of costumes; tastes and prejudices of the community, and so on. "We want a play," our correspondents write, "which will give us a chance to use all the members of the class—four boys and twenty-nine girls." Of course, there is only one way to get such a play, and that is to write it; unless one selects a piece with four male characters and contrives to decorate the stage in certain scenes with the otherwise superfluous girls. The former method is really possible for many a clever teacher, but such a one needs no advice from us. The historical pageant, and the adaptation of stories or narrative poems,¹ may furnish a way out; and sometimes a program of one-act plays solves the problem. In general, however, the safest way is to choose something which will adequately bring out the ablest pupils, and then to exercise all possible ingenuity in introducing the others into the program.

The old stand-bys are much more useful than is generally realized. Shakespeare, Goldsmith, and Sheridan cannot be carelessly counted out. *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Rivals*, if at all well done, still overpeer the petty traffickers even in the thing which the young actors most crave—the power to excite the right kind of

¹ See the admirable scenes and suggestions in the new *Dramatization* by Simons and Orr (Foresman).

laughter and applause. Clever pupils, ably directed, may thoroughly delight their friendly audiences in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, or *Twelfth Night*; or even in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, or *Julius Caesar*. Good short plays may readily be adapted from scenes in others of the Shakespeare classics: for example, "The Night Before the Battle," *Henry V*, Act IV, scene i; or "The Entrapping of Beatrice," *Much Ado about Nothing*, Act III, scene i. The standard plays, let me repeat, need marked ability in the coaching as well as in the acting; under the right conditions, however, they may be made as truly popular in their appeal as one could wish.

In searching further, the catalogues of the play-publishers are helpful, though one is likely to be confused by the multitude of pieces offered. Some of these lists, however, are arranged according to the number and sex of characters. The setting required and the time taken in representation are also shown, with something of the plot and nature of the play. Most of these offerings cost but fifteen cents each, so that one may select a dozen for examination at small expense. Unfortunately, the lists contain so much worthless stuff that this sort of blind choice is likely to waste time. The catalogues of the following firms, which will be mailed free on request, contain most of the available published plays commonly given by amateurs: Walter H. Baker & Co., 5 Hamilton Place, Boston; The Dramatic Publishing Co., Pontiac Bldg., Chicago; Samuel French, 28 W. 38th St., New York; Penn Publishing Co., 923 Arch St., Philadelphia; The Eldridge Entertainment House, Franklin, Ohio; Dick & Fitzgerald, 10 Ann St., New York.

A specially helpful book called "A Selected List of Plays for Amateurs" may be secured by writing Miss E. A. McFadden, 113 Lakeview Ave., Cambridge, Mass. (\$2.00. Postage 6 cents). In Cambridge also (41 Concord Ave.) is the "Agency for Unpublished Plays," which will furnish a valuable list of pieces that may be had in manuscript for the payment of a small royalty. The Drama League has issued an excellent list, "Plays for Amateur Acting" (address 736 Marquette Bldg., Chicago). The Stage Guild of Chicago¹ prints interesting plays and pageants by T. W. Stevens and others. Many of the recent professional successes may be

¹ Address in care of K. S. Goodman, Railway Exchange Building.

produced for a royalty of from \$25.00 to \$50.00; for lists of these apply to one of the following agents: Alice Kauser, 1432 Broadway, New York; Rumsey Play Co., 152 W. 46th St., New York; Sanger & Jordan, 1428 Broadway, New York; American Play Co., 1451 Broadway, New York. This is the only method of securing such a play as, for example, Barrie's *The Little Minister*, for which a royalty of \$50.00 is payable. Payment of the royalty due on a play is of course a serious moral as well as legal obligation, a fact which amateurs occasionally disregard. But most of the pieces advertised by firms mentioned in the preceding paragraph may be produced without such payment.

By way of further specific titles, I may mention some plays which have in one way or another proved successful at the University of Illinois and the local schools:

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| The Cricket on the Hearth ¹ | The Hour Glass ⁴ (one act) |
| For One Night Only ¹ | A Pot of Broth ² (one act) |
| Liberty Hall ² | The Workhouse Ward ⁵ (one act) |
| Nance Oldfield ¹ (one act) | The County Chairman ⁶ |
| David Garrick ² | Miss Civilization ² (one act) |
| Nephew or Uncle ¹ | Marvelous Bentham ⁷ (one act) |
| The College Politician ¹ | Owin' to Maggie ¹ (one act) |
| The Palace of Truth ² | The College Widow ⁶ |
| The Honeymoon ³ | Maids and Matrons ¹ |
| Our Boys ³ | Giles Corey |
| 'Op-o'-me-Thumb ² (one act) | Pygmalion and Galatea ² |
| The Servant in the House ⁶ | The New Age ⁷ |
| The Passing of the Third Floor Back ¹⁰ | |

Among others that seem to have proved pretty serviceable are these:

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| A Rose of Plymouth Town ³ | The Romancers ¹ |
| The Private Secretary ² | The Professor's Love Story ⁶ |
| An American Citizen ² | The Admirable Crichton ⁶ |
| London Assurance ³ | A Royal Family ² |
| Mice and Men ² | Old Heidelberg ² |
| Lend Me Five Shillings ² (one act) | The Man from Home ¹¹ |
| Caste ² | Trelawney of the Wells ¹ |
| The Prince Chap ¹¹ | The Knight of the Burning Pestle ⁸ |
| The Bishop's Candlesticks ² (one act) | The Shoemaker's Holiday ⁸ |
| Mr. Bob ¹ | A Message from Mars ⁶ |
| The Ladies of Cranford ¹ | Tom Pinch ² |
| Nathan Hale ¹ | Historical Pageant of Illinois ⁹ |

¹ W. H. Baker. ² Samuel French. ³ Dramatic Publishing Co. ⁴ Macmillan.
⁵ Maunsell, Dublin. ⁶ Sanger & Jordan. ⁷ Agency for Unpublished Plays. ⁸ Scribner.
⁹ Stage Guild of Chicago. ¹⁰ Shubert Brothers. ¹¹ American Play Co. ¹² Leiber Co.

But at best such lists only emphasize the scarcity of good dramas for school production. A few of the above deserve consideration on literary grounds, while others are highly artificial and theatrical. But at least their themes are free from grossness and excessive sentimentality, they are reasonably "actable," and each suggests some common type of audience which is sure to find it enjoyable.

The discriminating teacher, furthermore, will try to keep in touch with the best of contemporary drama, acted and published. The bulletins of the Drama League of America (Chicago) may readily be secured, and the new plays and criticisms are annually listed in the *Dramatic Index* edited by Mr. Faxon and published by the Boston Book Co.

In assigning parts, the all-important consideration is dramatic instinct. The valedictorian may not have a spark of it; the class cut-up may have so little of it that he would prove anything but comic on the platform; and the shy fellow who has always seemed rather dull may surprise you by carrying off the leading honors—if you discover him in time! For nothing is more common than to find some minor part forging into prominence as rehearsals advance, through the development of unsuspected dramatic talent. Sometimes, too, a pupil's nature here first finds a way to express itself.¹

First, then, try to find out who among your candidates can break through their own shells and throw themselves into some other character; not in dialogue alone, but in gait, pose, laugh, facial expression. Indeed, a bit of pantomime may reveal more of one's real histrionic nature than a declamation. An imitation of some well-known "character," or the reciting of a piece involving impersonation, may serve the purpose. The mere reading aloud of parts of the chosen play is unsatisfactory. But if a group can be made to laugh and strut and shout over the first reading of the play (when the parts are assigned almost at random) you may find the very freedom and effervescence of the moment revealing just the

¹ On one occasion, for instance, when I was ready to assign the parts in a school play I saw that my choice of the "heroine" seemed to both puzzle and amuse the girl's teachers. Not until the performance was over, however, and the girl had carried the play to success, did I learn that she had hitherto been considered an "impossible" sort of pupil. And as she was the making of the play, the play was really, in a way, the making of her.

qualities you are seeking. Whatever the method, encourage informality; the candidate before being judged should be "worked up" to a point where he is as free as possible from self-consciousness.

When you are sure you have tested the essential dramatic instinct of the pupils, ordinary principles of choice may determine the final allotment. If you have to choose between a gallant, temperamental Orlando whose enunciation is bad, and a wooden youth of perfectly proper speech, remember that it is much easier to correct faulty speech than to supply the dramatic spirit. Apart from this special consideration, however, it is the same energetic, responsive, *thinking* boy or girl that you have always relied on who will best repay your confidence now. Test the voice carefully, however, for two elements. It must have carrying power. And its quality should enable the speaker to suggest, or at least to avoid belying, the character assumed. This would seem unnecessary advice, but most of us have at some time been jarred by the healthy resonance in the tones of a tottering Adam, or by the soft and kittenish purr of a Portia as she triumphs over the Jew. This sort of incongruity often comes about because personal appearance has been too strong a factor in the choice. Remember that face and figure are capable of amazing stage-alterations, while few amateurs can effectively alter the voice. Test this for a moment with some candidate, by shutting your eyes and letting the sound of the voice suggest the character possibilities.

For the actual coaching of the piece, there are certain qualifications, such as tact and driving power, which should be called into play before one's dramatic instinct (*sine qua non*) may be given free rein with any assurance of success. Such things, of course, belong outside this discussion. But one other essential I may specially emphasize—*system*.

In the first place, system should be applied to the schedule of rehearsals. The exasperating "cutting" of rehearsals is sometimes due to neglect of this factor. Each pupil may be pledged in advance to keep certain rehearsal-dates free from engagements. A full-length play needs (in addition to individual coaching) from fifteen to twenty-five two-hour rehearsals, extending over a period of from one to two months. For the play of average difficulty, the

shorter period is better, as the degree of concentration and interest is likely to be greater.

The coach must know, before the first rehearsal if not before assigning the parts, just how every detail of the play ought to go. In very few printed plays are the details of stage-management indicated. One should therefore make a "prompt-book," as the professional producer does. This may be done by interleaving the copy, or by pasting the sheets from two copies in a scrapbook so as to leave a blank page opposite each page of the text. In this, one notes down the "properties" and exact setting for each scene; also all important actions and changes of position of every character, opposite the proper lines, so as to show the precise grouping and relation of persons at any particular moment. This system is invaluable because each pupil comes to know with perfect definiteness the "business" for which he is responsible in each scene; each thing is done the same way each time—a very necessary procedure, by the way, if the coach is to establish his authority securely. It is true that rehearsals bring out awkward points and the actors may even suggest improvements on one's preliminary plans; but the system, though flexible, should be from the start as fully developed as may be.

The director will further find it advisable to write large in the margins all such directions as "Bell rings," "Ready for curtain," "Horns in distance," "Lights dimmed," and the like. Then the prompter (if, as often happens, he is "stage-manager" as well) is given timely warning to attend to the accessories as directed.

Mr. Ben Greet is issuing, through Doubleday, Page & Co., an edition of Shakespeare, one play to a volume, in which these managerial directions are supplied, opposite the text, with admirable fulness and illuminating comment. Nothing more helpful has ever been done for amateurs. To illustrate: in *Julius Caesar*, near the opening of the third act, is Cassius' line, "Casca, be sudden, for we fear prevention." Opposite this is the following note: "All these speeches are spoken with haste and intensity in an undertone. Caesar is fully occupied talking with Decius, Lepidus, Popilius, and Publius. Antony keeps R, so that Trebonius can easily persuade him to go off R in consultation about some official matter." And

beneath this is a diagram showing the precise grouping of the actors. The directions for staging the assassination are as follows: "This great last moment of Ceasar's must be slow, deliberate; he is literally dragged off the seat, staggers down C—a pause—he looks around and sees Brutus about to stab him; he opens his robe; Brutus practically embraces him with his sword; Caesar covers his face with robe and falls. There is a dead pause while you count ten."

The director may not choose to accept the "business" of another, but in his own way he must work out the details with equal fulness.

Of course the greatest problem of all is how to teach the pupils to act. If the coach can assume the various characters in turn, responsive pupils will accomplish a great deal by imitation alone. In any case, much personal and inspirational work is demanded. There are good schools for training actors, but I have never found a satisfactory handbook on the art. Dramatic instinct and the observation of good acting are a reasonable equipment for the coach. Mr. Greet's *Shakespeare* is full of wise and suggestive points. The phonograph, which now gives us records of many good speakers and actors, is an excellent supplement. And for action, pantomime, and gesture, the motion pictures now bring to one's door the ablest in these arts. In fact, for one situated where good dramatic performances are not to be seen, an excellent textbook on acting could be made by printing the axioms of the art, and then listing and analyzing the merits of the best phonograph records and cinematograph films. Add to these resources the rich photographic records of professional productions,¹ and the mechanical aids to the study of acting assume considerable importance.

It may be said that in the rehearsals the study of character should come first, because all else depends upon it. Make your pupil see and feel the person to be portrayed, even before he learns the lines; he is then much more likely to work out interpretive details for himself. The development of individuality in the student is in this respect highly important for his own good; but

¹ Byron Co., Broadway and 34th St., New York, issues a catalogue listing scenes from hundreds of important productions. See also the *Annual Dramatic Index*.

usually it takes firm dictation on the part of the coach to insure consistency and teamwork.

If the rehearsals are conducted with the right degree of vigor and system, the old bugbear of "learning lines" will quickly pass. The memory is so much assisted by association that if the reading of the text is carried on at the first rehearsals with strenuous practice of the accompanying action, the lines almost "learn themselves." Then if the laggards are promptly and properly dealt with (the possibility of being dropped from the play is a powerful stimulus) progress results.

The interpretation of lines should be cleared up promptly, so that they are read in the same way throughout. One or two rehearsals may well be given to this work alone; and even then it is well to have the lines read with all the fulness and force of a final performance. An old handbook says: "The two principal rules for an actor are: (1) Be perfect in your part, and (2) Speak out." Speak out! The untrained pupil simply has no conception of what this means. And so, from the first, spare no time or energy in coaxing or coercing the actors to make themselves heard. Until they seem to themselves to be shouting, they are not likely to be speaking loud enough. Delicacy of inflection and purity of enunciation—all the beautiful graces of speech—come to nothing without that supernormal carrying power, the sheer vocal energy needed to make an audience in the average hall hear without strain.

If there are any general directions that amateurs need oftener than others, they are the following: (1) Learn to stand still. When no action is called for, keep the hands and feet completely in repose. (2) Keep the head erect, and do not lower the eyes. (3) Walk firmly; do not lounge or sidle. (4) Make all actions and gestures confident and vigorous. (5) Whenever practicable, speak toward the audience, but do not appear to see them. (6) Make every line sound important. (7) When you "make a point" or deliver a climactic speech, give the audience an extra moment to appreciate it before proceeding. (8) When there is much laughter or applause for a speech, or an action, bide your time before proceeding. (9) With the exceptions just noted, speak the first word of your line so promptly on the "cue" that no other word could possibly be edged

in. (10) Study the remarkable power of suggestion in the simpler facial movements: the mere turning of the eyes, the smile, the sneer, the lifting of the brows, the frown, the dropping of the jaw; and depend upon them rather than upon the gesture for all but the more emotional effects. (11) If laughter or weeping is called for, remember that much practice is required to approximate a natural effect.

Finally, in answer to constant inquiries, a word as to the means of securing the accessories for a production. Fritz Schoultz & Co., costumers, and Funk & Co., wig-makers (Chicago), serve the Middle West trade competently. For other localities, note advertisements in newspapers and dramatic journals. The matter of makeup, by the way, is often a difficult one. A handbook like Fitz-Gerald's (published by Samuel French) is helpful, but much practice is needed. If the treasury will permit, a performance will gain immensely by having a professional for this work. For although the amateur has so much difficulty in assuming a rôle, he may at least be made almost perfectly to "look the part."